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ABSTRACT

A study of literature cannot be divorced from cultural contexts, nor can it ignore the humanist vision in interpreting literary texts. To discover dialogic bonds and boundaries between the reader and the text, or the writer and the audience, English classes should have two objectives: (1) to explore the diversity of perspectives, and (2) to relate readings to personal life and current events. Hermeneutics and reception theory are helpful in pursuing these objectives. To maintain a balanced rhetorical stance, both the logical and the emotional content of the text should be concerns of the audience. The ethical questions provide a system of checks and balances in relation to contextualized issues--whether political, social, economic, or cultural. To analyze Robert Frost's poem "Design" in class, the relationships of the rhetorical elements are examined. Logos, Pathos, and Ethos remain the fundamental elements of rhetoric that determine the subject matter, although the diversity of the audience and the pluralism of the American population complicates the question of balance. Dialogics of bonds and boundaries encourage students to avoid hasty generalizations, false dilemmas, and post hoc fallacies in the interpretation process. It is the personal and cultural background of an informed reader or writer that determines the bonds and boundaries of meaningful dialogics. (Contains 14 references.) (CR)

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ED 403 565

Dialogic Bonds and Boundaries

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A study of literature cannot be divorced from cultural contexts, nor can it ignore the humanist vision in interpreting literary texts. American Literature anthologies offer selections of works by great authors, but there is no effort to explore the dialogic relationships emerging from these works. The rhetoric of literary authorities does not merely record human experience, it furnishes an opportunity to examine the outcome of human experience within contextualized cultures. To render this rhetoric meaningful for classrooms with polyphonic voices and pluralistic backgrounds, I use Bakhtin's dialogics to relate abstract theory with practice.

By adapting Bakhtin's dialogics I can rely on the reader-response theory for interpretive analysis of literary works. I can also focus on the process of reading and writing as a "cooperative enterprise" that encourages the students to investigate a meaningful relationship between "the treasure-house" of personal experiences and the text (Iser 23).

To discover the dialogic bonds and boundaries between the reader and the text, or the writer and the audience, I pursue the following objectives in my English classes:

1. To explore diversity of perspectives.
2. To relate readings to personal life and current events.

In addition to Bakhtin's dialogic method I find Jauss's hermeneutics and reception theory very helpful in pursuing these objectives. To maintain a balanced rhetorical stance we interpret both the logical and emotional content of the text, not just concentrating on the three appeals but also the concerns of the audience. The ethical questions provide a system of checks and balances in relation to contextualized issues - whether political, social, economic, or cultural. Whenever overzealous one-sided analysis produces skewed perspectives, we refer to the university's code of conduct as an axiological center for a balanced vision that overcomes fallacies of false dilemmas and post hoc conclusions. I also emphasize the importance of "emotional intelligence," or the act of managing emotions, as a balancing principle in recognizing the bonds and boundaries between the reader and the writer.

Logos, Pathos, and Ethos remain the fundamental elements of rhetoric that determine the balance achieved by the writer in relation to the audience and the subject-matter. However, the diversity of audience, due to the increasing awareness of pluralism in American population, complicates the question of balance. Moreover, an awareness of these elements does not free us from the continuum of time or Aristotle's topic of Chronology which imposes a historical perspective on every text; therefore, I emphasize the importance of logos, pathos, and ethos in the acts of reading and writing, as well as interpreting and communicating.

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Classroom Sampler: To analyze Robert Frost's poem "Design" we examine the relationships of the rhetorical elements.

Logos: I emphasize to my students the connection between logos and logical coherence of the text. Can you capture the logical and chronological process that leads to the death of the white moth?
Response 1. White spider is cunning and cruel in causing the death of the white moth.
Response 2. White heal-all is an evil setting or a trap for the white moth's death.
Response 3. White spider weaves a web around the white heal-all merely to perform an act of self-preservation.

Pathos: What is the connection between the emotional response and the interpretation of this poem?

Because my course objectives encourage students to use personal perspectives, there is no fixed interpretation that is right or wrong as long as the analysis can be supported by evidence derived from the text. We discover that the emotional reactions to the setting and characters of the poem are merely reflections of diverse viewpoints in the above responses.

Ethos: What are the ethical implications?

The analysis is not complete until we address the ethical outcome. This is the time to examine the attitudes and perceptions that are latent in the emotional response. The first two responses clearly display the reader's sympathy for the white moth. The third response lacks that element of sympathy, but it is not diametrically opposed to the other two responses. It does not suggest that:
a. The setting was not evil for the moth.
b. The spider's planning was not cunning and cruel toward the white moth.

The point is that the reader's viewpoint determines the interpretation of the outcome, and failure to connect emotional attitudes with logical developments in the process of time, an inseparable characteristic of all natural experience, is to assume a blindfolded stance. If emotions are not balanced by logical explanations in the reading and writing process, there is an element of confusion which does not allow the reader or the writer to correlate personal experience with the reality of the text.

Is it correct to assume that because the moth is not seen as a victim in response 3, this response is devoid of all ethical considerations?
Is it possible to ignore the natural laws of self-preservation in developing a coherent interpretation of the design of nature?
So, we all sigh at the death of the "Poor moth!" Yes,"poor," not just because the spider kills it, but also because it is too stupid to be more conscious of its own self-preservation in relation to its environment and adverse forces within nature.

We agree that adverse forces are unethical forces from the moth's viewpoint, but not from the spider's or the heal-all's viewpoint. In this freefold analysis "the semantic whole" of the poem becomes meaningful to all students despite varied perspectives. At the same time, they learn that diversity of viewpoints enriches the process of interpretation through dialogic bonds and boundaries and confirm the merit of my pedagogy of interpretation.

Dialogic Bonds

In "The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response," Wolfgang Iser cites the example of the Milton controversy between C.S.Lewis and F.R. Leavis about their interpretations of Paradise Lost: Lewis claims that Leavis hates the very same "that I see and love". Even though both critics employ identical criteria, they draw totally different conclusions which suggests the importance of "intersubjective perceptions" in the interpretation process. While the dialogic bonds empower the writer to enlist the sympathy of the toward a certain character or issue through emotional appeal, the absence of this appeal is an indicator of a boundary between the text and the reader. Such boundaries can only offer pleasant openings when common ground is discovered through a shared vision about ethical concerns.

These dialogics of bonds and boundaries encourage students to avoid hasty generalizations, false dilemmas, and post hoc fallacies in the interpretation process. Such a response also balances pathos and logos and serves as a bridge for an ethical bond between the reader and the writer. Of course, this ethical bond between the audience and the writer is subject to many questions which merely promotes investigative learning and revisioning of previous knowledge.

Dialogic Boundaries

In a student-centered classroom, respect for the boundaries of individual identity is mandated by our university's code of conduct: there is a commitment:
"To respect himself and herself" AND "To respect others."
At first glance the use of the third person for both self and others seems somewhat odd; however, it is the best possible approach to create a neutral and detached context for every individual who volunteers membership in the Hampton community.

Since cultural differences may be rooted in one's belief-systems, it is appropriate to acknowledge contextual boundaries that help create a non-threatening context for a meaningful dialogue between communities who may not have identical goals yet they vested interests in the future of a shared environment. In a democratic classroom that welcomes diversity as a means to explore new possibilities and meanings, we foster respect for boundaries of personal identity. Thus, adopting an interrogative mode of learning, I use the following four blocks, the CCCC approach, for self-discovery and effective communication: context, complexity,

coherence, and comprehension especially in the writing process.

Context: How to narrow down the topic? (Controlling the context by selecting the theme or the thesis statement)

It is important to limit the scope of students' discussion by clearly defining the context. For example, they address questions of power in a political context and questions of responsibility in a social context. Moreover, they need to delineate the time and setting in relation to the outcome (When? Where? Who?) before analyzing the parts in relation to the three rhetorical elements.

Complexity: Whose point of view? (Diversity of perspectives implies identifying more than one viewpoint).

Pathos, Logos, Ethos are not one-sided phenomena. They are inter-related and central to the interaction between the reader and the writer. Usually studied as the three appeals (Axelford 481-90), they are equally relevant as concerns when reader-response to the text elicits divergent possibility of meanings or implications. The realities of the writer and the reader are not necessarily the same. Knowledge available to the reader may contrast with the limited knowledge of great writers because of their chronological and cultural constraints. Likewise, interpretations that are limited by cultural or chronological constraints can serve as a foundation for building new structures of knowledge. Students' reader-response engages them in a dialogue with the writer as well as peers, drawing them into a negotiating process in search of meaningful relationships between the written word and human reality. Participation in this process teaches students that hasty generalizations and oversimplification of facts can be problematic.

Coherence: Does the text make sense? (logical connections and transitions of language are helpful context clues). We employ an inclusive approach to rhetorical strategies of cause and effect and comparison and contrast, instead of taking a compartmented approach. By concentrating on the relations between causes and results, we answer questions of continuity and chronology. Likewise, comparison is useful in cultivating common ground, whereas contrast facilitates the definition of key ideas. We compare to identify a familiar context or to illustrate ideas through analogy, simile, metaphor, parable, fable, or myth. We use contrast to classify inter-related parts within the whole. We also use contrasting structures of knowledge to illustrate ironic situations. Most importantly, we make use of comparison and contrast in evaluating student papers in relation to written criteria.

Comprehension: What is the theme or the thesis statement? (There are many possibilities for interpretation).
A valid proof of understanding is the student's response to the questions raised. Because reader-response familiarizes students with diverse possibilities for a meaningful analysis, the final selection becomes a matter of personal choice. This choice

coherently links emotional appeals or concerns to logical explanations and ethical implications. Ultimately, it is the personal and cultural background of an informed reader or writer that determines the bonds and boundaries of meaningful dialogics.

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